

AMD17-132 4/15/08

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From: Bart Watson [watsonbart@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, April 14, 2008 4:58 PM
To: DOT STIP
Cc: Palin, Sarah H (GOV); david.c.miller@fhwa.dot.gov
Subject: Amendment #17 to the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program
Attachments: STIP amdmt 17 08-4-12.doc

To: Division of Program Development
Alaska Dept. of Transportation & Public Affairs

Date: April 12, 2008

Re: Amendment #17 to the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program

I would like to weigh in on your draft amendment #17 to the STIP.

I am a 27-year resident and 25-year homeowner in Juneau, and I have also owned land in Haines for 28 years. I have a strong interest in any transportation plans and infrastructure developments for this region of Alaska.

I am a strong supporter of improving transportation between Juneau, Skagway and Haines, but for a variety of reasons, I have concluded that construction of a road along Lynn Canal is a very poor idea. I urge instead a re-dedication of any available Juneau Access transportation dollars to making significant improvements to the Alaska Marine Highway System between these cities.

Here are some of my objections to building a road from Berner's Bay to the Katzeihin River Delta, as proposed in this amendment.

1) I believe the estimated cost in the budget is vastly short of the true cost required to build the road, based on comparisons with similar road construction already carried out in Alaska in other locations, as well as on the quickly rising prices of a wide variety of commodities and materials needed in the project.

2) The drive would be narrow, full of curves, mentally demanding and dangerous. In contrast, riding the ferry up Lynn Canal is relaxing and extremely safe. I would much prefer to take the ferry and be able to enjoy the scenery, relax or catch up on work, socializing or sleep.

3) The road would inevitably be closed many days of each winter due to the many avalanche slopes the route traverses. The ferry is virtually never shut down due to weather. While the ferry might very occasionally be subject to mechanical delays, that probably occurs less frequently than with my car, and AMH should have backup capability to substitute another ferry in such an event. (The frequency of avalanches is also another very real safety issue.)

4) One of the most valuable characteristics of Juneau is its true wilderness setting. The quality of life provided by such a compact island of civilization in the midst of a sea of wilderness is enormous. I would hate to see that quality compromised by sprawling development along a road corridor on the shore of one of our most beautiful bodies of water. One of Juneau's true economic advantages is this very setting, as its uniqueness attracts both committed residents and hundreds of thousands of visitors. Removing that unique feature of Juneau would risk making this place much similar to any other location in the US and thereby reduce its attractiveness. We certainly don't live here for the weather, the swimming or any number of other advantages that other cities have over Juneau.

5) The road as currently planned is truly a very long driveway to a ferry terminal. The inconvenience and inefficiency of having to pick up and drop off foot passengers by vehicle for 90 miles to the Katzeihin ferry terminal would be truly frustrating. The majority of my visitors who come to Juneau by ferry do so as walk-ons. It's already an imposition to have to pick them up at the Auke Bay terminal, where there is no public transportation available for passengers, instead of at the original downtown ferry terminal. A terminal at Katzeihin would be vastly worse, requiring hours of driving to accommodate visiting friends or family. Given its great distance, the economics of public transportation all the way to that terminal are much inferior to serving Auke Bay, which itself is apparently not economically viable for any of our bus companies.

6) With the twin challenges of rapidly rising fuel costs and global warming, it seems irresponsible to be constructing

new roads in a location where we have a perfectly viable existing mass transport system in place. The ferries need to be updated and should be done so with more fuel efficient designs, but large mass transit carriers have an inherent efficiency advantage over multitudes of individual vehicles. Let's not condemn residents to a road transportation system which we might well not be able to use in the future, and instead set our sites on the most efficient and environmentally friendly system that technology can provide.

7) The ferry system will inevitably suffer declining support if the Juneau Access Road is built. The Lynn Canal route is one of the most popular of the ferry trips and attracts relatively high ridership. That particular ferry run would become uneconomic if the road were built, and overall revenues and support for the rest of the ferry system, which services routes where there is often no real road option, would decrease proportionately.

8) The road project is enormously divisive in Juneau. Much of the support that does exist for the road here, is based on the appallingly poor management the ferry system has suffered in recent years. There are several very simple improvements that would make a huge difference in customer service and satisfaction on the ferries, and consequently tip public sentiment much more in favor of choosing improved ferries over building a new road. Please refer to the several McDowell Group studies commissioned over the past several years that have recommended a range of AMH improvements.

These reasons are the major points in what I believe is a compelling argument against wasting our limited transportation dollars on the ill-advised and very expensive construction of the Juneau Access Project. There are many very clear and pressing transportation needs throughout the state that should take precedence over this road in the competition for available funds. First and foremost for Juneau is improving the Alaska Marine Highway system. Even if some or all of these particular funds are limited to road construction, there are many projects that are more appropriate places to spend them.

Finally, completely apart from all the reasons I have listed above, I want to make the point that inclusion of the Juneau Access Project in this STIP appears to violate the congressional mandate spelled out by Alaska DOT&PF in its introduction to their supporting documents. I quote here from Commissioner von Scheben's cover letter: "The new funding regulations impose significant requirements. For example, in putting together this amendment — and any future amendments, we have to be reasonably confident that all funding for a particular project will be available to complete it before we can include it in the STIP."

It is abundantly clear that the Juneau Access Project does not meet this requirement, both because the overall cost has been badly understated, and also because the actual project — the access road to the rest of the Alaskan and Canadian road system — has been arbitrarily and artificially broken up into stages, the construction of which serve no benefit compelling enough to stand on their own merits. This is blatant slight of hand that violates at the very least the spirit of the regulations.

I have had great admiration for the Palin administration's insistence on openness and honesty in state government thus far. This project is one additional example of the deceptive practices of the previous administration. It should be pulled out of the STIP and considered in the full light of day as a complete project, open to comparison at real current costs with alternatives including improvement to the Alaska Marine Highway System. It would be a clear violation of the regulations to include the project in the STIP at this juncture when most of the funding has not even been identified, much less secured.

Thank you for your consideration,
R. Bartlett Watson